

The SPOT Effect:

People exhibit a Spontaneous Preference for their Own Theories

Nikhila Mahadevan and Aiden P. Gregg
University of Southampton, UK

Would you believe in a theory, just because it was yours?

BACKGROUND

- People exhibit a **spontaneous preference** for positive information related to the **self**.
- They spontaneously:
 - prefer letters in their own name to other letters in the alphabet (*the name letter effect*; Nuttin, 1985)
 - prefer goods they own to those they do not (*the endowment effect*; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990)
 - fail to recall negative feedback directed at them but not at others (*mnemic neglect*; Green, Sedikides, & Gregg, 2008).
- Here, we examined the spontaneous occurrence of **Intellectual Arrogance (IA)** and **Intellectual Humility (IH)**.

DEFINITIONS

Intellectual Arrogance (IA):
The inclination to regard a belief as true *merely because it is one's own*

Intellectual Humility (IH):
The disinclination to do so

THEORY

- We examined IA and IH through an **evolutionary lens** (Gregg & Mahadevan, 2014).
- We theorise that human cognition has evolved to treat psychological ideas and beliefs like physical territories and possessions.
- IA: reflects the 'embodied' tendency to compete over and defend one's beliefs as one would one's possessions.
- IH: reflects the 'emancipated' tendency to evaluate ideas and beliefs based on reason and evidence.
- **Hypothesis:** People will display a **spontaneous tendency towards IA**, tending to regard a theory as more likely to be true when it was attributed to **them**, than when it was **not**.

METHOD

Participants were told about a fictional planet called Wugworld, where two species of alien, **Niffites** and **Luupites**, dwelled.

One of these species were **predators**, and the other **prey**.

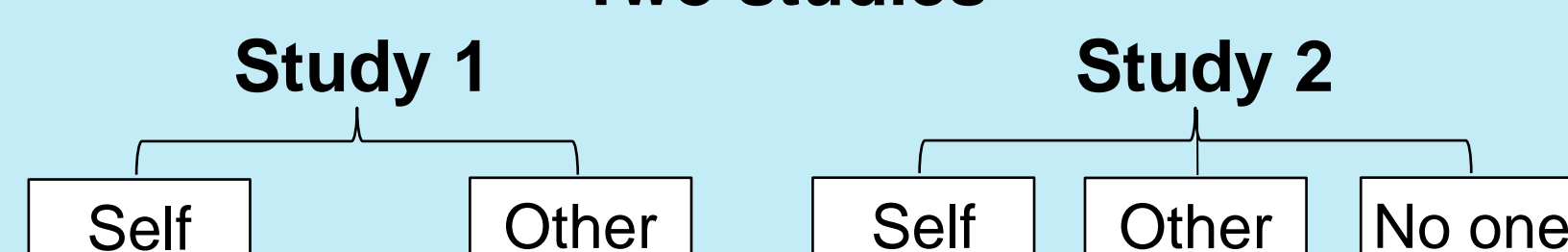
Participants were asked to evaluate evidence for the theory that:

"Niffites are predators and Luupites are prey"

They were presented with **7 pieces of evidence**: 4 loosely confirmatory, 3 loosely disconfirmatory. After each piece of evidence, they were asked to indicate how likely it was that the theory was true.

Certain to be FALSE Certain to be TRUE

Two studies



Predator

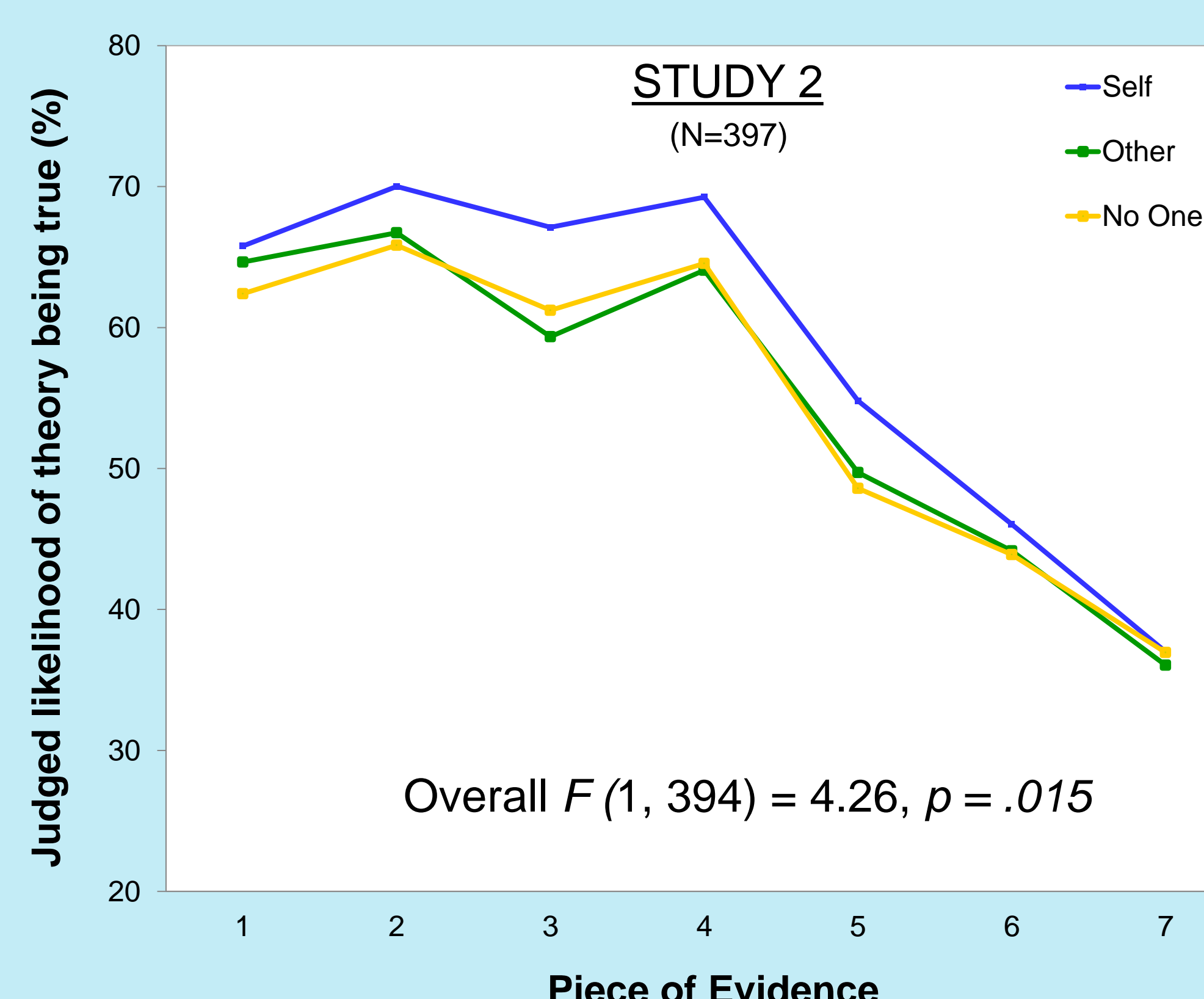
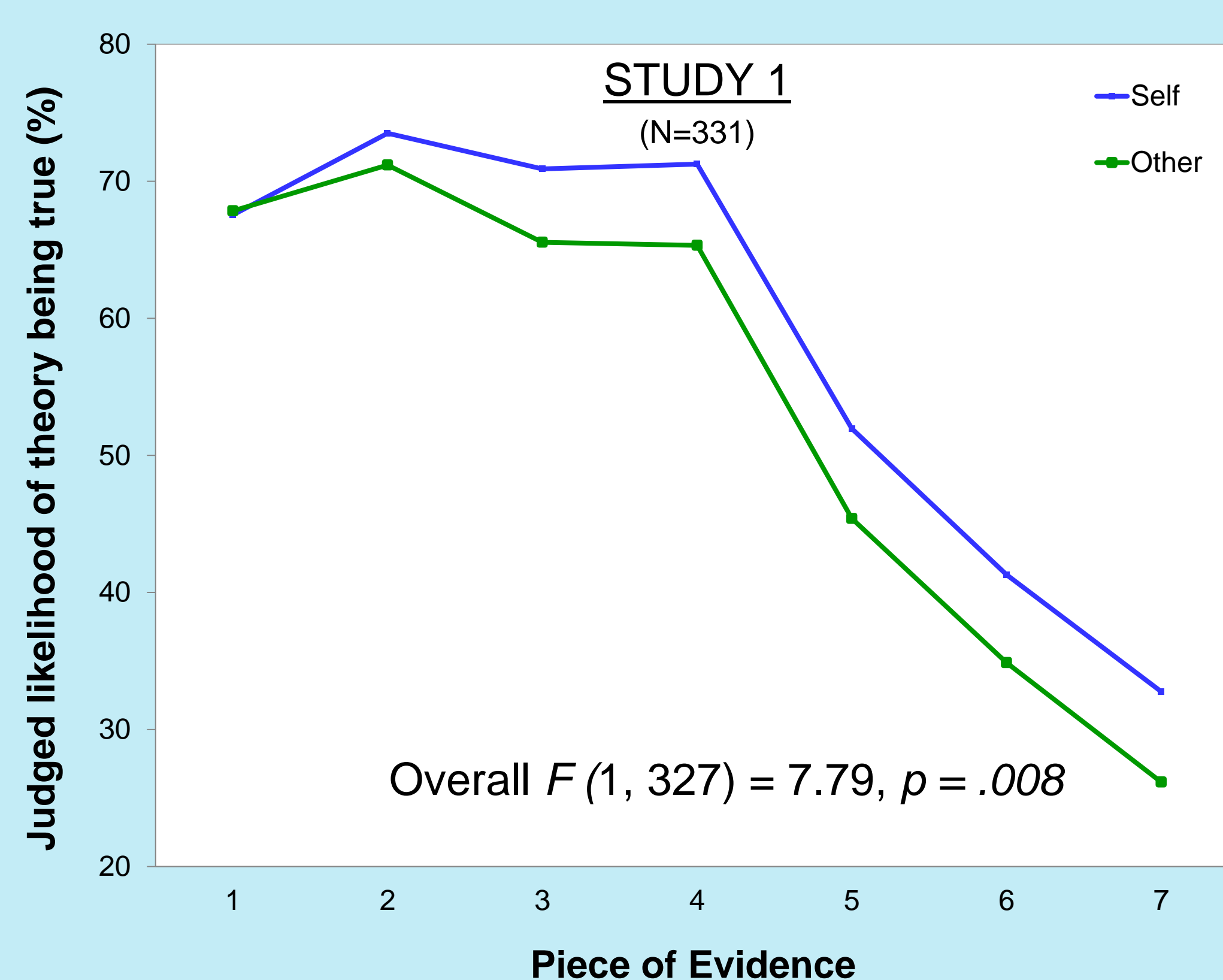


Prey

PIECES OF EVIDENCE

1. Niffites are at least twice as big as Luupites
2. Niffites have powerful teeth and dangerous spikes on their heads
3. Niffites often spend time watching Luupites carefully
4. Niffites and Luupites often have aggressive interactions
5. Luupites have sharper teeth than Niffites do
6. Luupites have been observed eating the dead bodies of Niffites
7. Luupites have been observed attacking Niffites

RESULTS



SUMMARY OF RESULTS

In both studies, **participants demonstrated IA**, regarding the theory as being significantly more likely to be true when it was ascribed to **them**, as opposed to **another person** or to **no one**. (The latter two conditions did not differ significantly from one another).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- We suggest that this occurrence of IA as a minimal effect—merely asking people to imagine that a fictional theory was theirs—testifies to its primacy and potency.
- IA is a throwback to our evolutionary heritage, in which the desire to win zero-sum competitions for physical resources has been transmuted into a desire to win zero-sum arguments in the psychological realm of beliefs.
- Next steps:
 - To see whether social and personality variables moderate the effects.
 - To see whether IA and IH can be manipulated experimentally.

REFERENCES

- Green, J. D., Sedikides, C., & Gregg, A. P. (2008). Forgotten but not gone: The recall and recognition of self-threatening memories. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*, 547–561.
- Gregg, A. P., & Mahadevan, N. (2014). Intellectual arrogance and intellectual humility: An evolutionary-epistemological account. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 42*, 7–18.
- Kahneman, D., Knetsch, J. L., & Thaler, R. H. (1990). Experimental tests of the endowment effect and the Coase theorem. *Journal of Political Economy, 98*, 1325–1348.
- Nuttin, J. M. (1985). Narcissism beyond Gestalt and awareness: The name letter effect. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 15*, 353–361.